



Conferences

Report of the International Congress in Esfahan, Iran:

Towards a Revival of Islamic Arts and Crafts



Naqsh Jahan Square (Imam Square)

میدان نقش جهان (میدان امام)

Introduction

The Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA) and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance – Organization of Culture and Islamic Relations, Islamic Republic of Iran, jointly organized this International Congress on Islamic Arts and Crafts, which took place in Esfahan between 4 and 9 October, 2002.

The Congress attempted to highlight Islamic culture through its arts and crafts by pointing out their beauty and value. In addition, it suggested ways and means to create favorable conditions for artists and craftspeople, conditions which are critical in encouraging them to continue their skills and to transfer them to the next generations. This is essential both for the preservation and the continuity of the cultural heritage of the Islamic World.

The Congress deliberated on the challenges relating to design and methods used,

technical cooperation and developing skills, exchange of techniques practiced, improvement of the quality of production, education and training of skilled artisans, financing, marketing and the obstacles encountered, patronage and national policies.

The Congress aimed to promote and assist the creation of an awareness of Islamic arts and crafts in the world. It provided a unique opportunity for raising interesting new approaches and possible solutions to some of the major problems facing the future of Islamic arts and crafts development. The event tried as much as possible to assess and determine the prospects of economic, social and cultural development of Islamic arts and crafts in various regions.

75 research papers were presented, constituting a survey of the present state of Islamic arts and crafts in a number of leading countries in the field. Delegations

hailed from Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Egypt, UK, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, The Netherlands, Oman, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Syria, Tatarstan, Tunisia, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, and the host country, The Islamic Republic of Iran. Most of the participants were scholars of history of art, experts, specialists, academics, policymakers, planners, arts administrators, artisans, and representatives from universities and institutions concerned with Islamic arts and crafts. The Congress provided them as well as the audience with the opportunity to pool their knowledge and experience, to investigate and assess the general survey of the existing situation of arts and crafts and development thus far, and methods adopted in different countries for the identification of pertinent issues. ➤





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problems and prospects. This gathering, apart from being a valuable forum for the sharing of experiences between relevant organizations and countries, also addressed specific issues for future development in a wide variety of fields.

The following is a detailed agenda overview of the congress:

First Session: *Islamic Architecture* - chaired by Dr Robert Skelton

Second Session: *Art of Calligraphy* - chaired by Princess Wijdan Ali, who also chaired the Plenary Session.

Third Session: *Arts and the Cultural Dialogue* - Chaired by Professor Saleh Lamei

Fourth Session: *Islamic Paintings and Miniatures* - Coaired by Dr Abd al-Rahman Ayoub

Fifth Session: *Influence of Islamic Arts and Crafts on European Art* - chaired by Professor Günsel Renda

Sixth Session: *Traditional Textiles, Embroidery and Costumes* - chaired by Dr Ali Saleh al-Magham

Seventh Session: *Revival of Islamic Arts and Crafts* - chaired by Professor Attilio Petruccioli

Eighth Session: *Islamic Tiles and Ceramics* - chaired by Dr Sabiha al-Khemir

Ninth Session: *City Life, Jewellery, and Islamic Bazaars* - chaired by Professor Machiel Kiel

Tenth Session: *Papermaking, Gilding, Binding, and Marbling (Ebru)*- chaired by Dr Hamdan Taha

Eleventh Session: *Wooden Arts and Crafts* - chaired by Dr Mehrangiz Mazaheri

Twelfth Session: *Present State and Promotion of Crafts* - chaired by Shaykha Altaf al-Sabah

Thirteenth Session: *Marketing, Development and Patronage* - chaired by Dr Asad Arabi

Fourteenth Session: *Islamic Patterns and Metalcrafts* - chaired by Mr N Suzuki

Aims

The Congress aimed to explore major issues that determine the future directions concerning creativity in Islamic arts and crafts. Among them:

- * To assess the present state of Islamic arts and crafts in the Islamic world and to determine the economic, social and cultural measures that need to be taken for the future development of this field;
- * To discuss measures that can be taken to guard against the loss of Islamic values and traditions with a view towards maintaining the uniqueness of Islamic arts and crafts heritage;
- * To encourage young artisans to produce new works and stimulate creativity;
- * To take measures to preserve some endangered traditional arts and crafts and ensure continuity;
- * To develop a strategy for global cooperation on this subject area.

The programme started on Friday, 4 October, with an opening address by His Excellency Shaykh Muhammad Araki, Chairman of the Organization of Culture and Islamic Relations, who inaugurated the exhibition of the artisans at Chehel Sotun Palace in Esfahan. He welcomed all the participants, who came from various parts of the world, and emphasized the importance of the event as a tool for more cultural dialogue in the world. He proposed the establishment of a centre for Islamic arts and crafts in the city of Esfahan that would encourage further cooperation in this field.

The Opening Ceremony of the Congress began with a recitation from the Holy Qur'an and was followed with an address by Ahmad Masjed Jamee, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. He emphasized the importance of the Congress as an opportunity for further cooperation among concerned authorities and institutions working in the field of Islamic arts and crafts, concluding his address by calling for more



زخارف بديعة في أحد مساجد اصفهان.
Arabesque in a mosque in Esfahan.

cooperation among artisans through the establishment of a union of artisans, the establishment of a city museum in Esfahan, and the allocation of an Iranian award for master artisans of the Muslim world.

His Excellency Dr Abdelouhed Belkeziz, Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) said in his speech that the International Research Centre for Islamic History, Arts and Culture (IRCICA), set up years ago by the OIC in order to revive the heritage of the people and countries of the Islamic Umma, had done magnificent work over the past decade, particularly in unveiling such a heritage, and they exerted a gigantic and sustained effort to salvage such heritage. As a result, IRCICA has become an authority, a reference point for many researchers and historians.

Prof. Dr. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, Director General of IRCICA pointed out during his address that IRCICA was regarded by many as a focal point of Islamic arts, while its Craft Development Programme was enhanced with the involvement of OIC Member States' ministries and international institutions. He emphasized that the Congress would contribute to the promotion of understanding among cultures and that the holding of the event in Esfahan had a special importance and meaning - promoting dialogue between civilizations.

Finally, His Excellency Engineer Hosseini, Governor of Esfahan, welcomed all the participants on behalf of his city. He also welcomed the proposal of having a city museum in Esfahan for Islamic arts and crafts. ➔





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حرفي إيراني يعرض مهاراته.

An Iranian craftsman demonstrates his skills.

Recommendations

The congress made the following recommendations among others:

It pointed out the importance of the dialogue among cultures, as well as the revival of Islamic arts and crafts. It viewed as ntial to review and study anew the main crises and challenges that some Islamic arts and crafts went through during their long history in order to better withstand new crises and challenges, particularly with the advent of the new technologies and the reactions they provoked among artisans.

Lessons from the past indicate that the problem was not necessarily due to such new technologies. The history of Islamic arts has known many crises as a result of technical advancements and openness to the arts of other civilizations, which were either surpassed, assimilated or incorporated. Each time, the solution came from deep contemplation and clear discernment of the philosophical and aesthetic principles of Islamic art and its manifestation, and the complete understanding and global vision of mankind and existence that any artist must have. If we could appreciate the difficulties and challenges involved, we might turn what we now see as a failure into a gain.

Indeed we should look to the potential in arts and crafts not only for enriching tourism or the export market but also, and more importantly, for reinforcing and expanding pride and self-consciousness, and revaluing these rich traditions as a living art.

Some of the practical measures needed to improve the state of Islamic arts and craft might be stated as follows:

- To activate Islamic architectural studies at the faculties of architecture and arts with the objective to be acquainted with the aesthetic values and concepts, modes of expression, architectural and visual aspects in urban design;
- To establish schools for craftsmen to train them;
- To arrange site visits to museums for school pupils and university students, to develop an aesthetic and authentic sense.

Restoration and Preservation of Architectural Heritage

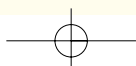
The Islamic architectural heritage, a major component of world civilization, is facing environmental, social and economic threats which could lead to its total extinction or corrosion. Many contemporary communities are struggling to define their identities in the face of globalization. As part of this struggle, great attention should be given to the old valuable architectural forms and prototypes through revitalization. We should join efforts at regional, national

and international levels to restore and preserve the Islamic architectural monuments and protect them against aggressions. The restoration movements will naturally help revive the crafts workshops and employ craftspeople in the different domains of architectural restoration which in turn will stimulate the revival movements in the concerned countries.

Training in Skills

Training is an essential element for forming well-versed craftspeople in workshops where experienced artisans, architects and artistic designers would gather and where modern construction or production methods and materials would be used in order to obtain the best possible results. Attempts to maintain costumes as a living tradition within communities that still wear regional garb has better chances of succeeding. It would require, as a first condition, a plan of work to train people in the skills allowing their perpetuation. As traditional costumes get to be discarded, a vicious circle is set up: the artisans producing raw materials essential to make the costumes are likely to abandon the craft, and as this occurs it becomes impossible to reverse the situation. So it is of paramount importance that special techniques of spinning, dyeing, weaving and stitching are not left to die out altogether with the older generation. The Congress proposed the establishment of institution-building activities covering, among other things, training of trainers for master artisans, entrepreneurship development, design improvement, marketing advisory services, and so on. ➔

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The congress called for a definition of the responsibility of the media and the role it must play vis-à-vis the development of Islamic arts and crafts, in order to achieve a revival and diffusion at all levels, whether local, regional, or international, for instance, by raising more awareness about the importance of reviving and supporting this sector.

Rehabilitation of Cultural Values

The Congress called for the initiation of a national campaign for the "rehabilitation" of our own cultural values and the different aspects of our material culture: our architecture, arts and crafts as well as our costumes.

This campaign should make use of all available means. The mass media should be galvanized to raise our awareness of the importance of our national heritage. Local collections and projects reviving traditional crafts, because of their cultural implications, should not be treated the same way as those related to consumer goods and should be given access to special development funds and allowed special tax deductions. Regional costumes should be displayed in small local museums to add to the pride and self-esteem of those still wearing them, and all kinds of publications, ranging from postcards to academic studies, should be funded.

Without wanting to sound pessimistic, what remains is to insist that, like other endangered aspects of our culture, traditional costumes be given state patronage to find their place in national museums and to be studied in universities. Private collections, research and publications should also be encouraged as this would be one way of preserving their memory for future generations.

Government and Patronage

Broader support by governments and other agencies is needed to make the sector more institutionally advanced with regular wages and benefits for artisans. The responsibility to ensure the continuity of these traditional crafts cannot be placed on the shoulders of the governments alone; every concerned citizen or members of the society should also play a role. Only then the survival of these traditional crafts can be rest assured.

Education

School curricula have provisions for art studies, but art is hardly taught in schools due to lack of teachers. It will require an effort on the part of the governments or school authorities to promote art studies by training art teachers. There are sufficient collections of Islamic arts and artifacts at the museums as resource materials. Promoting arts and craft education is commendable for its ties with economic benefits as well.

The only difficulty that can be foreseen in introducing Islamic arts and craft education is the shortage of trained resource personnel. Traditional techniques should be included in the local school curricula and taught in arts and activity classes, thus ensuring a constant spread of traditional skill, as well as confirming future generations in their respect and admiration.

Esfahan City Museum

The Congress proposed the idea of having a museum in Esfahan as the city is considered itself by many to be an open museum of living cultural heritage.

Tourism, Islamic Arts and Crafts

The Congress emphasized the importance of linking the arts and crafts business with tourism in order to encourage more advanced awareness of the importance of this sector. This can be achieved through the establishment and/or strengthening of craft promotion centres, such as "Traditional Arts and Craft Villages", which would act as a focal point for: (a) technical improvement, (b) marketing/business advisory service, (c) preservation of traditional crafts - a cultural reference, and (d) tourism. Linkages with international NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and international craft retailers could also be facilitated through the villages and encourage channels for marketing.

Quality Control

There is a need for quality control improvement in order to improve the

production process and design, to open new market horizons and to strengthen collective procurement and marketing efforts. In the process of development, state-of-the-art surveys, needs identification for quality improvement, and sub-sector analyses for selected crafts could be carried out.

Economic Aspects and Regional Networks of Cooperation

Policymakers should review the prevailing rural industry development policies and explore the role of artisan craft development, which has a significant potential in terms of new job and income generation. Definition of traditional crafts, fine art crafts and handicrafts may be needed in the process of stipulating the policy framework. Furthermore, establishing close linkages between global value chains and respective craft clusters may become an important development strategy, since they can provide a wide range of embedded business services and assure effective export market penetration. International NGOs also play an important role in providing embedded business services for quality improvement, particularly for the traditional crafts being produced in remoter rural and mountainous areas.

Effective networking among different players such as craft clusters, support institutions, NGOs, and global value chains is a key success factor for technical improvement and export market promotion. A Craft Promotion Centre could provide integrated support services to different craft clusters and assure close linkages with the above-mentioned players. Thus, establishment of Traditional Arts and Craft Villages, or strengthening their capabilities if already in existence, can be an effective approach. It could also assure sound preservation of traditional artisan crafts and their cultural reference and could act as a country-level focal point for establishing broader regional networks.

Role of the Media

The congress called for a definition of the responsibility of the media and the role it must play vis-à-vis the development of Islamic arts and crafts, in order to achieve a revival and diffusion at all levels, whether local, regional, or international, for instance, by raising more awareness about the importance of reviving and supporting this sector. ■

